

Meriden: A Connecticut Irishtown

"Irishtowns" can be found in the four corners of the world as memorials to the diaspora — the scattering — of the Irish people. Irishtown is a district in the cities of Limerick and Kilkenny and a townland in the county of Antrim. On Gibraltar, Irishtown is a street; in Victoria, Australia, a gold field settlement; in Jamaica, a village; in Nova Scotia, a seaport. There is an Irishtown Bend in Cleveland, an Irishtown in California, an Irish Township in Illinois, and in Oxford Township, Pennsylvania, there is an Irishtown Fire Department. Connecticut has no incorporated Irishtowns, but our Land of Steady Habits is filled with towns and neighborhoods whose history makes them eligible for the title. This issue is devoted to how the city of Meriden came to qualify as a Connecticut Irishtown.

In 1836, Paddies laid rail tracks to future industrial city

Poverty-stricken Irishmen arriving in Connecticut in 1836 found a job opportunity waiting for them. One of the state's earliest rail companies, the Hartford and New Haven, had just awarded a contract for clearing a right-of-way and laying track 18 miles northward from New Haven to Meriden, a town that would eventually become a booming industrial center. Due to a financial panic, the first rail section was not completed until December 1838, and the laborers immediately began the second section of 22 miles to Hartford.

The work was backbreaking. With saws, picks, crowbars and shovels the laborers cleared and graded the roadbed. Wooden ties were hauled in and positioned. Then teams of eight men lifted each 30-foot-long, 500-pound iron rail, dropping it in place at the foreman's signal. Spikes were driven in with sledge hammers and the crews moved on.

Every step along the way was fraught with danger, and in late January 1839, one Irishman was killed. "An accident occurred a few days since on the railroad, a little beyond Meriden attended with a loss of life," reported the *New Haven Herald* on Jan. 31. "Three men were excavating a bank, the ground being frozen above them, when it suddenly gave way and buried

them in the earth. One of them, an Irishman, we did not learn his name, was instantly killed. The others not much injured. We are told that not an Irishman has been at work on the section since."

Two Catholic priests in New Haven — Father Philip O'Reilly and Father Bernard Tevin — had ministered to the Irishmen as



they moved north during the previous two years. One or both priests probably came to Meriden to arrange for the funeral and burial and to console and encourage the other Irish laborers and their families. Certainly, unlike the newspaper which did not think it important, they took the time and effort to identify the deceased.

Some of the Irish remained in Meriden

when the railroad work was finished. According to Meriden historian C. Bancroft Gillespie, Father Tevin celebrated Mass in the home of Robert Clarke on North Broad Street. Clarke's name is on both the 1840 and 1850 Meriden census records. In 1850, he was listed as a 38-year-old laborer whose household comprised not only his wife Mary, and their children, Christopher, Mary J. and Susannah, but also Susan Conley, 50, Michael and Bridget Scully, 30 and 28, and John Robbin, 24, all born in Ireland.

Census returns reveal that in the 30 years between 1840 and 1870, Meriden grew from a mostly rural village of 1,880 into a robust industrial city of 10,500. The growth, which continued well into the 20th century, was fueled by a boom in manufacturing and a continuing flow of immigrants, many of them from Ireland.

"Meriden is one of those towns which shoot up by magic, and before it is much observed by its busily occupied neighbors, begins to count its populations in the thousands," suggested the *New Haven Register* in 1852. "It is now rich in its farms and gives employment to a large working population through its numerous manufacturing establishments. Three years ago, the

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Irish population multiplied as Meriden factories prospered

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Catholics numbered a solitary family or two; now they are increased to a congregation of over 500 ..."

In 1850, Father Tevin organized Meriden's first Catholic parish, St. Rose of Lima. Parishioners were able to purchase the former St. Andrew's Episcopal Church for \$1,450. Originally, St. Rose served the Catholics of nearby Wallingford, Cheshire and Southington as well as Meriden.

Ten years later, the outbreak of the Civil War served as another measure of the increasing Irish community. When a movement began to raise an entire regiment of Irishmen in Connecticut after the fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861, Meriden's Irish produced nearly the entire roster of Co. B of that outfit, the 9th Connecticut Infantry.

The company was led by Patrick Garvey, a 36-year-old native of County Clare, who was an iron moulder and lived with his Irish-born wife Catherine and six children in West Meriden. The Meriden Irish who served with him in Co. B included: Sgt. John Duffey, corporals Michael Reynolds, James Butler, Malachi Hackett, Edward Riley and James Morrissey; musician Patrick Cain; privates Andrew Anderson, Patrick Bohen Jr., John and Patrick Burke, Andrew Carlin, John Carroll, John Cassidy, James Crevy, James Donohue, James Doran, Thomas Farrell, John Ferris, John Frawley, Patrick Green, Joseph Harrington, Thomas Harvey, John Hazlett, Michael and Patrick Hughes, James Kelley, John L. McKay, Michael Magee, Michael Molloy, Thomas McCormick, John Murphy, Luke Quinn, Thomas Roach, Daniel Ryan and Thomas Waldron.

Between 1850 and 1870, the number of Irish immigrants in Meriden more than quadrupled from 340 to 1,530. The city's continued growth gave them many more job opportunities than the original railroad workers. Very few Meriden immigrants

made a living off the land as they had in Ireland, among them Jeremiah Nichols, farmer, Charles Ward, farm worker, and James Ryan, gardener. The vast majority worked in industry and commerce: John Donohue, glass cutter; William Watson, engraver; James Cahill, teamster; John Mehan, gas fitter; William Collins, mechanic; Michael O'Brien, butcher; Morris O'Brien, bookkeeper; Edward Leach, stonecutter; John Malone, shoemaker, James Roach, plumber; Pat Lahy, harness maker; George Wally, painter; John O'Neill, watchman;

John Hill, Thomas Kennedy, Joseph Kenney, James Killan, Patrick Ryan, Michael Rouke, Robert Kelly, Thomas McGuire, William Kavanaugh and William McGovern.

Even some Irish women found work in Meriden factories: Mary Fallon, Catherine and Anne Dooley were listed as "Brita workers." Susan and Mary Burke and Hano-ra Ring worked in a clock factory, and Alice Watts, Mary Maloney, Margaret and Ellen Nolan were weavers

For Irish women, however, domestic service remained a major source of employ-

ment in Meriden as elsewhere: Mary Bush in the home of merchant Levy Morris; Margaret Canfield, home of mason Charles Perkins; Margaret Fall, home of B.P. Foote, insurance agent; Kate Davol, home of Bela Carter, printer; Ellen Earley, home of E.W. Williams, dressmaker; Anna Canora home of Joel Guy, banker; Mary Gracey, home of L.P. Chamberlain, farmer.

In 1872, four women came to Meriden from Ireland specifically to fill a different occupational opening. The rapid growth of the city's Irish and Catholic population convinced Father Thomas Walsh, the then pastor of St. Rose, of the need for a school.

Walsh turned for help to the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, the first of whom had come to the Hartford Diocese 20 years before and established schools in Hartford and New Haven. He wrote to the St. Xavier Convent of that order in Ennis, County Clare, inquiring if there were four sisters of "zeal, piety and ability" to take on the task of getting the school started. Thirty sisters volunteered. Those selected sailed for New York in late April 1872. They were greeted at the railroad depot in Meriden by Walsh and joyful parishioners. They went about their work with such dedication and efficiency that in 1915 more sisters opened a school at St. Joseph Church in Meriden.

The railroad that brought the first Irish laborers and the Irish nuns to Meriden was



The manufacture of Britannia ware was the major industry, but still only one of many others, that attracted large numbers of impoverished Irish immigrants to settle in Meriden. The Britannia Company eventually became the International Silver Co.

Patrick Wallace, blacksmith; Peter Harkins, John Heelan, Patrick Maloy, John Maney, Michael Luby, Owen McManus, iron moulders; John Smith, liquor dealer; Mark Riley and James Adams, saloon owners.

Metal working was a major part of Meriden's prosperity. The city was the home of the Meriden Britannia Co., which evolved into the International Silver Co., and numerous other companies that manufactured cutlery, pots, pans, grilles, railings and other metal products. So many Meriden residents were employed in the production of metal goods that in 1870 the census takers merely wrote in the abbreviation "Brita" for them. Among the Irish "Brita" workers were James Finegan, Edward Roark, Michael Casey, William Warnock,

the site of one more dramatic and tragic story involving an Irish immigrant.

Born in County Galway in 1876, Michael Donlon, a bachelor who lived with his uncle Martin Cunningham, was working as a porter at the Meriden railroad depot on Jan. 4, 1909. He was on the platform with a baggage cart when he saw a young girl and her mother, a Mrs. Gauthier, trying to cross the track ahead of the 2:12 p.m. express. The girl tripped, the mother tried to assist her. As the train bore down on them, Donlon leaped from the dock and in the nick of time pushed them to safety. The locomotive struck him a glancing blow, not injuring his body at all, but leaving a huge gash at the base of his skull. Bleeding profusely, he was rushed to the hospital where he died around midnight.

Donlon was hailed for his heroic sacrifice and a fund was established to construct a fitting monument to him. The Meriden division of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, of which he was a member, commissioned W.J. Luby to design the monument. On June 6 that year, several thousand residents turned out to pay their respects at the monument's dedication in Sacred Heart Cemetery.

"The one in whose honor we are met," said Mayor Thomas L. Reilly in his address, "did not respond to the roll of the drum or the bugle's call. No martial command sent him to meet death, but it was a summons to manly duty, just as urgent as was ever heard on the field of battle. And his response was instantaneous. Without thought of himself, without care as to what might be in store for him, this young man gave up his life that a mother and her child might be saved."

Sources: *New Haven Herald*, Jan. 31, 1839. *New Haven Register*, Oct. 15, 1852. *New Haven Herald*, Aug. 31, 1840. *Meriden Morning Record*, June 7, 1909, Sept. 3, 1915, *Meriden U.S. census returns*, 1840-50-70-80. *Meriden Morning Record*, Sept. 3, 2015. *Catholic Church in New England*, Vol. 2, "Diocese of Hartford," by Rev. James H. O'Donnell, Boston 1899, p. 366-367. "Meriden Irish immigrant killed in heroic rescue," *The Shanachie*, January-February, 1998. *A Century of Meriden*, C. Bancroft Gillespie, 1906, Part I, pp. 358-360; Part II, pp. 8, 179-182.

Meriden's support for Ireland's freedom

May 15, 1865 — "West Meriden: A large meeting of the Fenian Brotherhood was held on Friday evening at Morgan's Hall. New members were received, and about two hundred enrolled themselves for the rescue of Ireland." — *Hartford Courant*

March 1, 1872 — "John Mitchell, Esq., editor of the *Irish Citizen*, lectured at the Town Hall, Meriden, Wednesday on 'Grattan and O'Brien.'" — *Hartford Courant*

March 18, 1879 — "The fifth annual banquet of the Knights of St. Patrick at the Meriden House was the most enjoyable affair the knights have ever held in this city ... Miss M.M. Leahy of Hartford contributed greatly to the pleasure of the evening by her beautiful rendition of several exquisite Irish airs ... The first toast of the evening was 'The day we celebrate' to which President Foote responded with the hope that 'we shall soon celebrate a greater anniversary ... the day that shall witness Ireland taking her place among the nations. ...'" — *Meriden Daily Republican*

Feb. 21, 1880 — "The mass meeting under the auspices of the Irish societies of Meriden ... last night was very successful ... the speaker, the Rev. George W. Pepper of Ohio ... spoke very eloquently for over an hour, his subject being 'Ireland and the Irish.' ... When the meeting adjourned the subscription list showed about \$425 ... Canvassers have been appointed to collect in the factories and undoubtedly the fund will be swelled to \$1,000 in a few days." — *New Haven Register*

Jan. 24, 1881 — "The Rev. Lawrence Walsh of Waterbury, will lecture Tuesday evening at the Meriden city hall on the "Irish Land War" under the auspices of the Davitt Branch of the Land League ..." — *New Haven Register*

June 10, 1882 — "The festival of the Ladies Land League at Meriden city hall last evening was largely attended. The strawberry and cream tables were liberally patronized ... If the attendance is as large tonight as it was last night, the society will come out well ahead ..." — *New Haven Register*

April 8, 1893 — "One of the strongest home rule declarations ever sent from this side of the Atlantic was made public in this city last night. It comprised a manifesto signed exclusively by Englishmen in which Mr. Gladstone's Irish policy is unqualifiedly indorsed. The signers are all residents of Meriden, but hail from England ... The manifesto is especially significant coming from Englishmen and goes to show the rapidly increasing conviction in this country ... that home rule for Ireland should be no longer delayed..." — *Meriden Morning Record*

May 5, 1916 — An enthusiastic meeting was held in New Haven yesterday afternoon at which the martyred Irishmen of Dublin were extolled, English rule in Ireland bitterly scored, any proposed alliance between England and the United States deplored and the Connecticut branch of the Friends of Irish Freedom was organized ... A similar meeting is planned for Meriden in the near future. Members of the John Dillon Club of Meriden who were present: P.J. Hogan, president; Timothy O'Sullivan, vice president; Michael Kinnery, treasurer; Peter Murtagh, W.F. McLaughlin, James White and Jerry O'Sullivan ..." — *Meriden Journal*

Dec. 14, 1918 — "Poli's theater was crowded to the doors last evening at the mass meeting of the United Irish Societies of Meriden at which resolutions on self rule for Ireland were adopted Speaker James Regan Fitzgerald of New York said ... "Ireland wants no half measure. She has been ridden and overtaxed for seven centuries. Ireland and the followers of Ireland's cause believe in the self determination of all the small countries of the globe. Ireland has prayed for it and bled for it; the spirit has been awake for hundreds of years and until the hope is realized there never can be an everlasting peace." — *Meriden Journal*

Republican & Democrat made great team in U.S. Senate

"It does not happen often that a city of the size of Meriden has two of its native sons serving simultaneously in the U.S. Senate but that's the way it was in the 1940s ...," wrote columnist Warren F. Gardner of the *Meriden Record-Journal*. He might well have added truthfully that it happens even less often that both of them are Irish. That was the case, however, with John A. Danaher and Francis T. Maloney. And to make it even more remarkable, Maloney followed the custom of most Irish politicians as a Democrat, while Danaher went against the grain as a Republican.

Born in 1884, the son of Patrick and Grace Hickey Maloney, Francis left school at the age of 14, worked in a factory and as a counterman at a restaurant. In 1914, he was hired as a sportswriter for the *Meriden Morning Record*. He served in the Navy as a seaman first class during World War I, and upon his return to Meriden went into the real estate and insurance business. During the 1920s, he became active in politics, serving as chairman of the Meriden Democratic Town Committee, managing the campaigns of candidates on the local level and as superintendent of town charities.

In 1929, he was elected mayor of Meriden by a record-breaking margin, just in time to face the huge problems of the Great Depression. He was re-elected by an even greater margin, and in 1932 was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1934, he was elected to a six-year term in the Senate, and re-elected in 1940.

Stonecutter from Ireland

Danaher's grandfather and namesake was a stonecutter from the west of Ireland. He came to Meriden about 1858 and prospered to the extent that his son Cornelius was able to become a lawyer. When he went into politics, however, Cornelius joined the Republican Party because of his admiration for the progressive policies of Republican President Theodore Roosevelt.

Con Danaher's changeover led to a humorous tale in which one old Meriden Irishman asked another if he had heard that Con Danaher had switched parties. The other



Francis T. Maloney



John A. Danaher

Irishman, astonished, replied in almost disbelief, "Glory be to God and he was at Mass only Sunday."

Con Danaher's son John A. graduated from Yale Law School in 1921 and began practice in Hartford where he also became active in Republican politics and was appointed assistant U.S. attorney. In 1932, he was elected secretary of the state and in 1938, he won a six-year term in Connecticut's other U.S. Senate seat in a race against an Irish Democrat, Augustine Lonergan.

The combination of a Republican and a Democrat worked well. The Washington journalist, Allen Drury, praised both of the Meriden legislators and their teamwork. "John Danaher of Connecticut," he wrote, "already impresses me as one of the three or four ablest men in the Senate. Short, chubby, balding, with a round earnest, serious face and an obvious lisp, he looks like some intent little teddy bear when he gets up to speak. But what he says makes sense, and what he does makes more."

Drury also mentioned Danaher's "witty interpolations" into a Senate debate on an appropriations bill in 1943. And in 1944, he remarked on the teamwork that was evident between the two Connecticut Irishmen. After attending a farm subsidy public hearing, Drury marveled at "the cooperation which often distinguishes Maloney and Danaher ... The firm of Danaher and Maloney is not one to tangle with unprepared. Both partners are shrewd, witty, keen-minded, sincerely patriotic and capable. Nor is either one above a little blarney when the occasion calls for it."

Unfortunately, in November 1944, Danaher was defeated in his bid for re-election by another very capable Irishman, Democrat Brian McMahon of Norwalk. Drury wrote, "... on that day the membership of the United States Senate changed to some degree. Brilliant John Danaher, his enormous industry and statesman-like mind unable to salvage a voting record which laid itself open too fatally to the smear of 'isolationist,' went down to defeat."

Far from over, Danaher's career continued in the judicial branch of government. He returned to Connecticut and resumed the practice of law in Hartford. In 1953, he was appointed a circuit judge in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia until his retirement in 1980. He died on Sept. 22, 1990.

Two of Connecticut's finest

Just two months after Danaher was defeated at the polls in 1944, the other partner of the Connecticut dynamic legislative duo died in Meriden Hospital after a heart attack. Drury wrote: "The brilliant Connecticut team had put on its last performance indeed on Dec. 16, although no one could know then how tragically final it was. Dead at 50 is Francis Maloney, shrewd, practical, perceptive, one of the finest men and most capable of senators. Influenza turning to pneumonia, complicated by recurrent heart attacks, proved too much for the stocky little Irishman from Meriden. A worthy career of public service had been cut short far too soon. In the short space of one month, the Democrat by death and the Republican by defeat, Connecticut had lost two of the best men who ever sat in the U.S. Senate."

Both Danaher and Maloney are buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery in Meriden.

Sources: Warren F. Gardner, Of All Things, columns published in the Record-Journal, "They served different parties, but they served nation well," Jan. 13, 1989. Paul R. Keroack, The Shanachie, Connecticut Irish-American Historical Society, "Danaher ranks high among state's Irish politicians," Nr. 2, 2004. Meriden Record, Jan. 17, 1945.

Mother's love of books inspired dePaola

Tomie dePaola, a native of Meriden and one of America's favorite children's authors, credits his ancestry for a career in which he has both written and illustrated more than 250 books. Born in 1934 to an Italian-American father, Joseph dePaola, and an Irish-American mother, Florence Downey, Tomie told one interviewer, "This large, intimate, fun-loving Irish-Italian mix loved telling stories on each other; laughter and storytelling was an everyday ingredient."

Tomie knew at a very young age what he wanted to do with his life. He remembers "announcing to my first grade teacher that when I grew up I was going to make books with pictures." One of the prime factors in his success, he said, "was the fact that my mother was in love with books and spent many long hours reading aloud to my brother and me." For her part, "Flossie" as his mother was called by the family, recalled that Tomie "took to reading at a very young age and always had a pencil in his hand." His parents encouraged his interests and on Christmas when he was nine years old, all his presents were art supplies: paints, brushes, colored pencils, instruction books, water colors and an easel.

When Tomie graduated from high school, two cousins, Franny and Fuffy McLaughlin, who were professional photographers, encouraged him to study at their alma mater, Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, a college that offered a fine arts curriculum. He described his four years at Pratt as "heaven on earth," because of the constant emphasis on art.

Graduating from Pratt in 1956, dePaola entered for a short time a Benedictine monastery in Vermont where "I was sort of the resident artist," he said. In 1962, he began a career as a teacher of art in Newton College of the Sacred Heart in Massachusetts. In 1966, he did the illustrations for the first of his books, *The Wonderful Dragon of Timlin*. Later he went to California to teach at San Francisco College for Women, and in 1969 earned a master of fine arts degree from the

California College of Arts and Crafts. He returned to New England in 1972, teaching at Colby-Sawyer College in New London, N.H., where he lives today in a farmhouse.

Over the years, dePaola's work has ranged from designing greeting cards to painting murals for churches and hosting television programs. However, he has made his mark just as he predicted as a child: writing and illustrating books. To do that, dePaola often has reached back to his family and his childhood.

His book titled *Tom* is a good example. He himself was baptized Thomas Anthony in honor of his two grandfathers, Thomas Downey and Anthony dePaola. Anthony died before Tomie was born, but Thomas, who owned a grocery store in nearby Wallingford, became a companion, a teacher and the subject of the book *Tom*.

"He and his Irish grandfather enjoyed a special relationship," according to Tomie's biographer, Barbara Elleman. And in his introduction to another of his

books, Tomie explains just how special: "My Irish grandfather, Thomas Lawrence Downey, was a great storyteller ... I never tired sitting on his knee — and later, when I was a bit too big, sitting on the floor at his feet with one of my baby sisters on his knee — listening to his wonderful tall tales.

"Among the stories I loved best were the ones about the Irish — and the Downey family in particular. In those tales, I'm afraid 'dramatic flair' and artistic liberties took over for fact. But as any good storyteller knows, to embellish is to make the tale interesting, especially to a young Tomie."

Little wonder that biographer Elleman writes: "The child dePaola once shines through all his works, captivating readers and enriching the field of children's books."

Sources: *Barbara Elleman, Tomie dePaola, His Art and His Stories, 1999. Tomie dePaola, Jamie O'Rourke and the Big Potato, An Irish Folktale, 2009. "Thomas Anthony dePaola," Major Authors and Illustrators for Children, 2nd ed., Gale Group, 2002.*



Tomie dePaola

Irish customs live on

Meriden's history offers numerous examples of Irish immigrants assimilating into their new homeland. It also offers examples of them continuing the customs and traditions of Ireland.

In the early 1900s, for example, Meriden's immigrants followed the example of the Gaelic League which was organized in Ireland to restore Gaelic as the primary language of the people. In November 1901, the revival came to Meriden. "Irish-Americans and the Irish from across the water will have an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the beauties of the Gaelic language," wrote the *Catholic Transcript*, newspaper of the Hartford diocese. "The efforts of the John Dillon Literary Club with this object have so far been a success, a sufficient number having manifested a desire to join a Gaelic class. Room 6 in City Mission Building has been hired and Mr. Foley of Wallingford, an Irish scholar, will conduct a class on two or three evenings each week."

Professor Kelly taught dancing

Meriden also had its Irish dancing teacher. On New Year's eve 1897, the *Morning Record* reported: "At G.A.R. Hall tonight, Professor P.H. Kelly will tender his Meriden dancing class a New Year's reception. Elaborate preparations have been made for the event which includes 15 dances, including a quadrille-two-step, an entirely new dance in this city."

Kelly's Meriden class numbered 50 and he also taught classes in New Britain and Southington "a large delegation from each being expected tonight." Kelly was also referred to as a dance "prompter" in several newspaper items. The Meriden directory that year lists him as "a dancing teacher" rooming at 12 Grove Street.

Kelly was a native of Holyoke, Mass., born there in 1866, the son of Irish

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Anna Murphy Gibson became cemetery caretaker

A municipal problem that came to light recently in Meriden has revived the remarkable story of one of that city's Irish immigrants. The problem was described in an editorial in the *Meriden Record-Journal* on Aug. 28, 2017: "Meriden's East Cemetery is the resting place of some notable residents. Veterans of the Revolutionary War are buried there, as are at least three Meriden mayors.

"The city-owned burying ground, located at the end of Miles Place off East Main Street, is in a state of disrepair, however. The cemetery has not had an official caretaker since 1963, and no plots are believed to have been sold since then ..."

The editorial went on to note that a consulting firm had completed a study of the neglected burying ground and that the City Council had established a task force to consider its recommendations.

As an incentive to follow through on the recommendations, Jeffery Kurz, editorial page editor of the *Record-Journal*, wrote a column headlined "The Many Tales of a Cemetery." The column focuses almost entirely on the inspiring story of Anna Murphy Gibson. It began, "At Meriden's East Cemetery, there's a small, rectangular stone that marks the final resting place of Anna Gibson ..."

Anna Murphy Gibson was born in Ireland about 1835 and immigrated to the United States when only 18 years old. She found work, as did so many young Irish women, as a domestic servant. She worked in the home of Edward C. Allen, a farmer and a church deacon, and was said to have "presided in the kitchen of that hospitable home during the years of the childhood of the deacon's children."

On Dec. 3, 1862, Murphy was married at New Haven to William Gibson, also a resident of Meriden. The 1870 census returns list him as a mechanic and her as a housekeeper, both natives of Ireland with three children.

The house in which the Gibsons lived originally stood at the corner of East Main and Elm streets but was moved to 64 Parker St. When their home was moved, Kurz wrote, "Anna Gibson started working as a volunteer at the nearby cemetery. Concerned that so much of the cemetery was

not being maintained, she would tidy the lots and cut the grass. She put up a sign in the cemetery offering her services. One of her first clients was I.C. Lewis, who hired her to take care of his family lot. She took on similar work for others in the community and by the 1880s she'd been appointed sexton, or caretaker of the cemetery.

"It's worth pointing out that at the time this was not considered work suitable for a woman, but Gibson was apparently an intrepid sort who was not unwilling to show others, including men, how work should be properly done.

Anna's husband, William Gibson, died in 1900. She outlived him by almost three decades and continued as the cemetery's



At the top of her gravestone in Meriden's East Cemetery, Anna Murphy Gibson's name is partially hidden by grass. The photograph is by Jan Franco, and Find-A-Grave.

sexton for all those years, working there until she died, at age 94, in 1929.

In May 1925, when Gibson celebrated her birthday, the *Meriden Record* published a front-page story of her long career. It began the story with the suggestion that her dedication gave "to Meriden, it is believed, the distinction of having the only 90-year-old woman cemetery caretaker in the United States."

The story explained that Gibson was busy just then putting the cemetery "in suitable shape for Memorial Day ... Wielding grass clippers, shovel and trowel with the same energy and enthusiasm which first led to her appointment as official sexton of the cemetery back in the 80s, she is cutting grass, mending broken stones, straightening fences and filling cavities in order that 'her' cemetery, the closest intimate thing to

her heart, may look its best in the eyes of Memorial Day visitors."

"In the midst of tombstones, she is with friends. Memories of long ago lay buried all about her. At one side, for instance, is he last resting place of the Congregational minister, who, she relates, was the first to shake her hand when she came to Meriden from Ireland in 1853.

"An impressive monument marks the grave of Gen. Walter Booth, whom she knew well, and who died in 1870. A more humble stone reveals the burial place of her own husband, William Gibson, dead these 26 years."

"Flitting here and there about the burial ground, with all seeing eyes and every ready hand and tool, she is the pride of 12 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. Her activity has caused her relatives and numerous friends no end of surprise."

When Gibson died just four years later, on Feb. 15, 1929, she was eulogized as "the city's oldest employee, for nearly 40 years sexton of the East Cemetery and the Broad Street Cemetery ..."

"Mrs. Gibson has been a familiar figure about the cemetery and all who have burial plots there or who visit the cemetery have become accustomed to seeing her at work ... She was a member of the Congregational Church and until very recently had been able to go to church occasionally and was frequently seen walking down to the city hall and even to the shopping center ..."

In her latter years, Gibson was assisted in her sexton duties by her daughter Dorthella Gibson who "has during that period of time amassed most of the information regarding the cemetery which had previously been known to none but her mother."

She was survived also by another daughter, Mrs. Margaret Stocking and a son, William H. Gibson.

Now almost a century after her death, the example of the caring and energetic young Irish immigrant who enriched the city in her lifetime is once again leading the way toward an important civic improvement.

Sources: Meriden Record-Journal, Aug. 25 and 28, 2017; Meriden Record, May 23, 1925; Feb. 16, 1929; Meriden Daily Journal, Feb. 15, 1929. Ancestry.com.

Meriden was an all-star Irish baseball community

Connie Mack, the “Grand Old Man of Baseball” began his spectacular career in the game in Meriden. Born Dec. 22, 1862, in East Brookfield, Mass., Cornelius McGillicuddy was the third of seven children of Irish immigrants Michael and Mary McKillop McGillicuddy.

Only 18 years old, Mack was working in a shoe factory in his home town and playing baseball on the side, when the Meriden club in the Connecticut League hired him as its catcher in 1884. Meriden finished second in the league with a 25-22 record. That season, Mack won the hearts not only of the Meriden fans, who on the final day of the season presented him with a gold watch, but of some major league scouts.

In 1885 and 1886, Mack played for Hartford. In 1887, the Washington club in the National League bought his contract. After an 11-year career in the majors, he went on to a half century of managing in Pittsburg and Philadelphia. As a manager, he won nine pennants, appeared in eight world series and won five. He was part owner of the Philadelphia Athletics from 1901-1936, and full owner from 1936 -1954.

Among Mack's accomplishments during his 70-year career was helping Jack Barry, the best player ever to come out of Meriden, to get a start. Barry was born in 1887, the son of Patrick Barry, a Meriden storekeeper and his wife Margaret Doohan. An all-star athlete at Meriden High School, Barry left Holy Cross College after his sophomore year to join Mack's Athletics in 1908 as the shortstop for Philadelphia's "\$100,000 infield." With that infield, the Athletics won the World Series in 1910, 1911 and 1913. Barry performed especially well in the 1911 series victory over the New York Giants when he hit .368.

In 1915, Barry was traded to the Boston Red Sox and played in the 1915 World Series when the Sox coasted to a five game victory over the Philadelphia Phillies. In 1917, Barry became player-manager of the Red Sox, but missed the 1918 season because he joined the U.S. Navy in World War I. That season, Babe Ruth led Boston to a World Series victory over the Chicago Cubs, the last time the Red Sox won the title until 2004. When he was discharged, Barry re-

Joan Joyce led Meriden Falcons to four world titles



Joan Joyce

Already rich in baseball history, Meriden in the 1970s became the home of the Meriden Falcons of the Women's Professional Softball League and its star player, Joan Joyce. Born in nearby Waterbury on Aug. 18, 1940, the granddaughter of Irish immigrants joined the Stratford Raybestos Brakettes amateur women's softball team in 1954 and quickly became both an ace pitcher and a feared hitter. After 10 years with the Brakettes, she led the Chapman College team in Orange County, Calif., to a collegiate title. Returning to Connecticut in 1967, she rejoined the Brakettes for another eight seasons. Her won-loss record on the mound over the years was an amazing 753-42, including 150 no hitters and 33 perfect games. As a hitter, her highest single season average was .406 in 1973 and she was the national tournament batting champion with a .467 average in 1971. In 1976, Joyce was one of the founders of the Women's Professional Softball League. The Brakettes came into the league almost intact as the Meriden Falcons with Joyce as part owner, coach and ace pitcher. The team won four consecutive championships in the brief life of the league with Joyce adding 101 pitching wins with only 15 losses. After her playing days, Joyce coached the women's softball team at Florida Atlantic University, winning nine conference championships and compiling 714 victories. In her spare time, she also played in the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour from 1977 to 1994.

Source: Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame online cwhf.org.

joined the Red Sox, but then returned to Holy Cross for a 40-year career as collegiate coach, compiling a 627-151 record.

In 1902, another all-star baseball player Edward Walsh came to Meriden. Born in Pennsylvania in 1881, Walsh was the son of a father from County Mayo who worked in the coal mines and a mother from Wales. While pitching for the Meriden professional team, "Big Ed," as he would come to be known, fell in love with an Irish lassie, Rosemary Carney, who sold ice cream at Hanover Park where the Meriden team played.

In 1904, Walsh went to the Chicago White Sox where he pitched until 1916. In his first season, he had a 17-13 record with a 1.88 earned run average and 171 strikeouts. In the World Series against the crosstown rivals, the Cubs, he struck out 12, a World Series record at that time, striking out at least one hitter in each inning.

Through the 1912 season, Walsh averaged 24 victories and 220 strikeouts and an ERA below 2.00 in five years. He also led

the league in saves five times during that period. His best season was 1908 when he had a 40-15 record with 269 strikeouts, six saves and a 1.42 earned run average.

Walsh was famed for his spitball, which was legal in that era. One hitter, Sam Crawford, a Hall of Famer, recalled: "I think that ball disintegrated on the way to the plate, and the catcher put it back together again. I swear when it went past the plate, it was just the spit went by."

When he retired in 1917, Walsh returned to Meriden. He worked for the city water department and became the pro at the Meriden municipal golf club. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1946 and died May 26, 1959, in Meriden.

Sources: Meriden Daily Republican, April-August, 1884. Frederick G. Lieb, "Connie Mack, Grand Old Man of Baseball," 1945. F.G. Lieb, "The Story of the World Series," 1949. Meriden Morning Record, July 3, 1915, April 16, 1917, April 24-27, 1961. Wikipedia: Ed Walsh.

Immigrants remembered their heritage in community activities

(Continued from page 5)

immigrants William and Ellen Fenton. After several years in Connecticut, he returned to Holyoke where he already had a dancing school which, with his son, William, also a dancing master, he continued to run for many years.

In 1907, Meriden sponsored a Labor Day weekend festival the proceeds of which were donated to the city's hospital. Everyone pitched in and transformed the city into "a fairyland of amusement." The various ethnic groups were represented and the Irish went to great lengths to make their exhibit just like a little bit of Ireland.

"The Irish societies have transformed their section at the lake near Franklin Street into a miniature Killarney," reported the *Morning Record*, "and the place has been handsomely decorated with white and green, while shamrocks are liberally displayed. A stand has been erected over the lake on which people are invited to kiss the blarney stone. On the lake two harpers from New Haven played Irish airs, which were greatly enjoyed."

Another feature of the Irish section of the festival was an authentic jaunting car. To secure the vehicle for the hospital festival, John H. Pallett, a grocer and a city public works commissioner born in Connecticut

of an English father and an Irish mother, made a trip to that most Irish of American cities, New York. He supposedly secured one of the traditional carts from Barney Gilmore, an Irish comedian. Jaunting cars were popular in Dublin and in Kerry where they were used to take tourists on trips around the Lakes of Killarney.

Sources: *Catholic Transcript*, Nov. 7, 1901. *Meriden Morning Record*, Dec. 30, 1897. *New Haven Register*, April 21, 1900; *Springfield, Mass., Republican*, Feb. 15, 1915; *Holyoke, Mass., U.S. census*, 1870, 1910. *Meriden City Directory*, 1897, 1899, 1900. *Meriden Journal*, Sept. 3, 1907, *Meriden Morning Record*, Sept. 4, 5, 1907

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with the past;
we have handed
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